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Idealism Realized: A Closer Examination of Leo Tolstoy's Influence on Jane Addams' Theory of Social Reform

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Widely regarded as a champion for social reform, Jane Addams has deeply influenced the progression of American social policy since Chicago's Hull House opened in 1889. Throughout her life, Addams struggled with how the privileged should interact with and aid those less fortunate. This struggle was fully realized as Addams compared her own response to that of Russian author and activist, Leo Tolstoy. Addams was deeply affected by Tolstoy's conviction that only those who literally live with the impoverished can claim to have served them. In the time Addams spent at his farm in Russia, she came into disagreement with Tolstoy's idealistic convictions. Her subsequent return to Chicago strengthened her belief that social change cannot be accomplished unless someone, such as herself, with the resources, education, and position necessary is willing and able to work for that change. Because of her rejection of the Russian author's idealism, the substantial influence of Tolstoy on Addams is widely minimized. However, a closer examination of Addams' work reveals the significant impact his life had on her own. Consequently, Jane Addams' rejection of Tolstoy's lifestyle can be viewed as only part of a larger conflict between idealism and realism in her own convictions.

Information about the Author:

Laurie Kenyon is a senior international service and chemistry double major. This paper was written in spring 2011 for the Christ College seminar *Traditions of Giving and Serving in America* taught by Professor Martin Buinicki. Laurie enjoys studying theories of social reform and this paper allowed her to explore some of the history of reform within the United States. After graduation, she hopes to study in South Africa through a Fulbright and then continue her education in graduate school.

Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Martin Buinicki

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